

# The Impact of Spiritual Abuse and Coercive Control in a Religious setting



**WALKING ALONGSIDE  
THOSE WHO HAVE  
EXPERIENCED  
ABUSE AND TRAUMA  
WITHIN FAITH.**

**GET SUPPORT.  
GET INVOLVED.**

**[www.replenished.life](http://www.replenished.life)**



## The Impact of Spiritual Abuse

Replenished are clear that the impact of spiritual abuse is significant and long term. This summary has been developed from the research around Spiritual Abuse of Lisa Oakley, Kathryn Kinmond and Justin Humphreys and the experiences of Survivors of Spiritual Abuse that we have been in contact with.

Research messages and survivors experiences will continue to be used to develop best practice in supporting, advising and advocating for survivors of spiritual abuse.

### 1. What impact can spiritual abuse have on health, wellbeing and faith?

Both adults and children who have experienced abuse, in whatever form, will often be profoundly affected by it. It is difficult to adequately describe the depth of feeling associated with such an experience but it may well result in questions at both a spiritual and personal level. If there is a spiritual aspect to that abuse then this depth of feeling and the level of profound impact is magnified.

Whilst each situation is unique the following aspects can be experienced to a greater or lesser degree:

#### **Basic Needs**

An experience of spiritual abuse may lead to financial difficulties through loss of employment, leaving a community, being unaware of or having difficulties accessing the welfare system, having to leave the family home or simply not having the support network around you that you had before.

Where the experience of financial abuse or fraud is part of the spiritual abuse this can lead to debt and further financial difficulties.

#### **Safety**

When you experience a traumatic event, your body's defences take effect and create a stress response, which may make you feel a variety of physical symptoms, behave differently and experience more intense emotions.

This fight or flight response, where your body produces chemicals which prepare your body for an emergency can lead to symptoms such as:

- raised blood pressure
- increased heart rate
- increased sweating
- reduced stomach activity (loss of appetite).

This is normal, as it's your body's evolutionary way of responding to an emergency, making it easier for you to fight or run away.

Directly after the event people may also experience shock and denial. This can give way over several hours or days to a range of other feelings such as sadness, anger and guilt. Many people feel better and recover gradually.

However, if these feelings persist or if the trauma is repeated or severe they can lead to more serious mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression.

People experiencing PTSD can feel anxious for years after the trauma, whether or not they were physically injured.

Common symptoms of PTSD include re-experiencing the event in nightmares or flashbacks, avoiding things or places associated with the event, panic attacks, sleep disturbance and poor concentration. Depression, emotional numbing, drug or alcohol misuse and anger can also be common.<sup>1</sup>

Trauma can hit even the strongest among us with great force. Of course, physical traumas and injuries are usually visually measureable and can lead to trauma-related physical pain, but emotional trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can also have a profound effect on the human body.

Emotional trauma can cause long-lasting brain changes that may lead to addiction, depression, and a host of other concerns that can devastate lives if left untreated. When traumatic events occur, it can take a significant amount of time to get over the memories, the emotions, and the feeling of just not being able to feel safe.<sup>2</sup>

**It is really important that you seek an assessment from a qualified medical professional if you are experiencing any of the above symptoms so you can get the necessary help.**

The symptoms of trauma can manifest both physically and mentally. The mind is, after all, part of the body. Our brain can impact our response to pain, our ability to heal, and our ability to feel rested and refreshed. Issues like depression or anxiety may prevent us from eating healthy meals or keeping healthy schedules.<sup>3</sup>

## **Physical health.**

It is important here to state that individual experience and response to the experience varies widely. We are not in anyway saying that everyone who has experienced Spiritual Abuse will have physical health issues, however for many survivors of trauma this is part of their experience.

People who have experienced traumatic events have higher rates than the general population of a wide range of serious and life-threatening illnesses including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, gastrointestinal disorders, and cancer.

Researchers have discovered that traumatic events dysregulate the adrenal and sympathetic nervous systems. More recently, research from the field of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) suggests that traumatic life events can lead to health problems through dysregulation of another key system: the inflammatory response. Prior trauma “primes” the inflammatory response system so that it reacts more rapidly to subsequent life stressors. Elevated inflammation has a causal role in many chronic illnesses. Recent studies also suggest some interventions that can supplement traditional

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/impact-traumatic-events-mental-health> accessed 3.2.2020

<sup>2</sup> [www.dualdiagnosis.org/mental-health-and-addiction/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-and-addiction/how-trauma-affects-the-human-body/](http://www.dualdiagnosis.org/mental-health-and-addiction/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-and-addiction/how-trauma-affects-the-human-body/) accessed 3.2.2020

<sup>3</sup> As above.

trauma treatment. These treatments include long-chain omega-3 fatty acids, exercise, and sleep interventions. Each of these interventions lessens inflammation, which will likely halt the progression to chronic disease for some trauma survivors.<sup>4</sup>

**It is really important that you seek an assessment from a qualified medical professional if you are experiencing any of the above symptoms, or need medical advice, so you can get the necessary help.**

## **Fear**

Common Responses to any experience of abuse are feeling powerless and afraid. This is also the case after experiencing coercive control and spiritual abuse. Fear can be felt in dealing with people of authority which can include religious leaders, police, social services and health professionals such as GPs and consultants.

### **Impact of leaving community, family relationships, job roles and volunteer roles.**

Isolation on leaving a coercive and controlling situation is also common. Having left what is often a close knit community means a loss of a support and friendship network. Where employment has been within the organisation that has been left then there can also be the loss of work colleagues.

There is a continuum of impacts on family relationships and everyone's experience will be different. Leaving a faith organisation or community can have an impact on family relationships. This can range from resentment to guilt, for the impact that leaving the organisation has on others.

The realisation of the impact of remaining in a situation where spiritual abuse was experienced can lead to feelings of guilt or resentment for the impact that spiritual abuse has had on all those in the family. In extreme situations one partner in the marriage or extended family can remain in the organisation. This can cause strain and tension in relationships between all members of the family. Where members of the family have been involved with the spiritual abuse being perpetrated this can be particularly difficult.

Where only one partner in the marriage has experienced or recognised spiritual abuse then this can impact on marriage. Where one partner wishes to leave the organisation and the other doesn't this will inevitably cause tension in the relationship. Where there are strains caused by the impact of spiritual abuse this can add to and accentuate existing strains and tensions. In particular the impact of financial issues as a result of loss of role, career or community along with the potential financial cost of moving can add considerable strain to a marriage.

Survivors find it difficult to trust others, and can be unsure of who is trustworthy especially in a faith based setting. This loss of trust makes Pastoral care or counselling challenging. It can also make it difficult for people to attend or stay at a new church.

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<sup>4</sup>Kathleen Kendall-Tackett (2009) Psychological Trauma and Physical Health: A Psychoneuroimmunology Approach to Etiology of Negative Health Effects and Possible Interventions Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy 2009, Vol. 1, No. 1, 35– 48© 2009 American Psychological Association

This loss of trust can lead to difficulties in forming new friendships. This is especially the case where house moves have been regular. The pain of losing friendships and community can lead to hesitation in developing new friendships or settling in a new community. This increases the isolation felt by many who have experienced spiritual abuse.

A common theme in the experiences of those who have experienced spiritual abuse is a loss of belonging. This loss of belonging goes beyond loss of community and those that have experienced spiritual abuse talk of not fitting into the secular world due to their faith but not fitting into the faith world fully due to their experience. This loss of belonging also incorporates the experience of isolation, loss of community, family relationships and friendships.

Many people are working through their experience of spiritual abuse alone with little support in the UK. Replenished hope that the support line and website along with the Facebook pages will contribute to an increase in support in this area.

## **Esteem**

Many people feel angry about what has happened, especially how God and faith have been used in their experience. Others will blame themselves for not noticing earlier what was really happening or for the way the perpetrator treated others. People can also blame themselves and feel regret regarding the way they were coerced to treat others. A confusing mix of these feelings can be experienced and these can change day by day. This can impact on emotional health.

It is common for survivors of Spiritual Abuse to question their perception of the experience and to revisit their experience often.

Self-esteem and self-confidence can be affected particularly where spiritual abuse has been long term and persistent. Characteristics of Spiritual Abuse such as public humiliation, along with loss of identity, loss of reputation, loss of respect within community, loss of dignity and value can all impact on self-esteem and self-confidence.

## **Impact on Faith**

Spiritual Abuse can have an impact on faith and ultimately a loss of faith. For many people their faith is central to who they are. A damaging experience involving their faith often impacts their sense of what they believe, and who they are.

A loss of your role in your faith or faith based organisation can be experienced. Where a career is linked to their faith this can lead to a loss of career. Again this may impact upon how they see themselves. This can lead to a loss of purpose and add to a feeling of not belonging. A loss of community and support network can also affect how they see themselves.

## **Long Term Impact**

It is important to note that for a majority of those who experience spiritual abuse the impact of their experience is long term. It is important to recognise that the road to recovery or living with your experience better is often not a straight road from A to B. This road varies from being a straight road to a winding and often rocky road over time. The

road may loop back on itself a number of times. There may be certain triggers, experiences and life events that can cause you to take a few steps backwards. At Replenished we hope to create a long term safe place for you to return to for support whatever stage of the journey you are on.

### **The impact of Covid19, Lockdown and other factors associated with the current climate.**

We have seen an increase in demand due to the ongoing situation around Covid19 for a number of reasons. This has been highlighted through research and from the voice of those that we support.

### **Social Distancing/ Isolation**

Whilst we are back to “normal” in relation to Covid-19 it still casts its shadow with new variants emerging, the impact of this is very real for many people.

Our experience at Replenished is that those who have experienced abuse and trauma within faith feel more isolated than the general population. A study undertaken by White and Van der Boor, found that greater anxiety and depression were experienced by those who self-isolated before the lockdown.

There is an increased prevalence of mental health issues, lower wellbeing and poorer emotional health in the community that we support. Issues such as anxiety, depression and PTSD are common in the majority of those that we speak to. There has also been a clear link between poor mental health and wellbeing and physical health seen in those that we have supported. Fibromyalgia, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and other autoimmune diseases are common in those who we have supported. All these issues are compounded from a reduction of support in the current climate either professional support or the support of families and friends. Anxiety and depression has been compounded by social distancing and isolation, media coverage and the authoritarian and controlled environment that has been necessary at this time. When you have been through an experience of coercion and control often in an extreme situation then the current authoritarian and controlling environment can cause triggers that increase anxiety and depression. Many of us feel that we have little control over the current situation and this is heightened where your previous experience of a lack of control has been associated with abuse and trauma.

There is also an impact on mental health, wellbeing and emotional health from Media coverage and social media of Covid19, Social Distancing, war, the economy/ cost of living crisis and the relentless reporting of bad news.. I am sure we can all relate to these feelings but these are likely to be magnified for those who have experienced for a number of reasons. Many have left faith organisations in very difficult situations often with the threat of divine judgements such as if you leave the organisation then God will strike you down or you will not be blessed or things will go wrong for your family. These messages that have been repeatedly given throughout their experience are ingrained in the psyche and in the times in which we live are proving to be a great source of fear. The conspiracy theories related to end times prophecy are also feeding the anxiety and fear. End times theology can be a common feature of those who have experienced abuse and trauma as a means of control and coercion. This combined with the fear mongering of new world orders and end times conspiracy theories can be a toxic and damaging combination.